

SPIRITUALISM



K. N. ROSS

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GHOST STORIES have always been popular, and if there is one thing better than meeting someone who has seen a ghost, it is meeting someone who will enable you to see a ghost for yourself. The supernatural—or paranormal—never fails to exercise an attraction upon us all. The sales of *Old Moore's Almanack* show no sign of waning. The fortune-teller, the palmist, the medium, the dowser will never lack clients, whatever anybody may say. The public is slow to admit that professional thought-readers are not genuine in the explanations which they offer of their turns. They do not want it to be an illusion.

One difficulty in discussing Spiritualism is that of disentangling the subject from that of paranormal phenomena in general. "There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamed of in your philosophy", is the ordinary unsophisticated approach. Queer things do happen in this world of ours, and of all people Christians should be the last to deny it. The Bible describes the activities of prophets at some length, and though it is true that their chief function was to tell people what the will of God was, it cannot be denied that in the course of doing so they often foretold the future with considerable accuracy. Mediums too are mentioned in parts of the Bible, though never with approval.

It is the same in the biographies of the saints. Even when the critic has eliminated all that seems untrue, doubtful, or imperfectly documented, there is more than enough left in the way of evidence to show that the saints have produced almost all the phenomena which the Society for Psychical Research exists to study. Such a book as Thurston's *Physical Phenomena of Mysticism* shows what an abundance of material lies buried in obscure biographies. Only the most hardened sceptic can deny the extraordinary psychic gifts of some of the saints.

The Christian is ill-advised to adopt a disbelieving attitude towards visitants from another world and paranormal happenings, for he is committed to belief in a world of spirits whose inhabitants have on occasion manifested themselves in this world, and to belief in the miraculous. Certainly it does not follow that he will believe any and every ghost story, for he will have regard to the quality and nature of the evidence, but in principle he will be predisposed to believe rather than to disbelieve. If three of the apostles saw Moses and Elijah talking with Jesus, it is impossible to rule out all communication between this world and the next as absurd.

Spiritualism was born in 1848 in the United States of America. Two girls, Maggie and Katie Fox, shared a bedroom with their parents in a cottage at Hydesville, New York, and loud rappings used to disturb their rest. A code of raps was arranged, and questions asked were answered by means of such rapping. The girls became ardent propagandists for consulting the spirits in this way and seem to have been genuine mediums. However, they later took to drink, and—whether truthfully or not—Maggie confessed that the results had been produced by trickery, though she subsequently withdrew this retraction. Nevertheless, the movement once started grew rapidly, and séances became popular. Circles were formed and answers sought from the spirits, whether by raps, planchette, automatic writings, or trance.

It might have been thought that in the course of over a hundred years the spirits in question would have answered some of mankind's age-long questionings. Is there such a thing as re-incarnation? Half the mediums say yes, and with equal determination the other half say no. But either there is continuity of life, with the possibility of restored fellowship with one's relatives and friends in the next life, or the continuity of experience is broken and the soul, having forgotten its previous existence, starts all over again. If the spirits cannot tell us anything definite about such matters, they are not likely to be good guides on other subjects. They are not even sure about the existence of God or the truth of orthodox Christianity (though this is usually condemned because it attacks Spiritualism). At some séances Christian hymns are sung and prayers are said, but other psychics are strongly anti-Christian. The only thing that

Spiritualists are agreed about is the fact that there is a future life, but about everything else they are fumbling and uncertain.

For the sake of argument we have assumed hitherto that the medium does enable the inquirer to establish contact with a spirit, and that information from the spirit-world can be communicated. But, as we have seen, this information is so untrustworthy and so often grievously mistaken that it is hardly surprising that the Church forbids her children to take part in such necromantic practices. Indeed so many lies are spread by séances that many believe that it is with evil spirits the medium establishes contact, and there are many sad tales of the outcome of ignorant dabbling in such things. Many people have come away from a séance with an overwhelming sense of evil which has seemed to contaminate them for a long time afterwards.

But it is open to anyone to believe that spiritualistic phenomena are produced by trickery. It is as certain as the nature of the case allows that most of the phenomena are fraudulent, though the majority of investigators allow for a small residue of the genuine. The opinion of experienced investigators is that genuine mediums do sometimes *unconsciously* fall back on fraud when genuine phenomena are not forthcoming. In the trance-state recourse may be had to fraud, though the medium herself may be a person of integrity. But it must be disagreeable for anyone with psychic gifts to know that while in a temporarily dissociated and hysterical state she may deceive and cheat those whom she is purporting to help. And if she is a professional medium, she will be especially prone to force results, for motives of prestige as well as for financial reasons. This is generally admitted by scientific investigators, who are often unsparing in their denunciations of "back-room mediums" who produce one's grandmother for five shillings.

How is such an "experience" to be obtained? Let us suppose that Elsie wishes to get in touch with her grandmother. She goes to a medium—but the medium does not normally profess to get into direct touch with the grandmother. The medium has a "control" which (or who) takes the place of the medium's consciousness, and which (or who) tries to get in touch with the grandmother. But the late President of the Society for Psychical Research in his book, *The Personality of Man*, clearly favoured

the view that both "control" and "grandmother" were different centres of consciousness of the medium herself, psychologically constructed by her as a piece of dramatization, with the real grandmother perhaps somewhere in the background. Thus even if the communication is all that it claims to be, it is liable to distortion on the way. And if so much allowance has to be made for psychological construction, it is just as easy to suppose that the medium employs information obtained telepathically from the living and is not in touch with the dead at all. What is certain in any case, is that the explanations which mediums themselves give of phenomena are not to be trusted. "Controls" with names like "Silver Birch" and "Peggy" may be parts of the medium's own personality. The case-books of the psychologists are full of instances of dual and multiple personality.

Most people would agree that strange things happen both at séances and elsewhere. The Spiritualist explanation of them (or many of them) is to ascribe them to the power of spirits. But that is not the only possible explanation, and we should distinguish between psychical research and Spiritualism. The Society for Psychical Research was formed in 1882 "with a single-minded desire to ascertain the facts and without any foregone conclusion as to their nature". It has accumulated a great mass of evidence about supernormal happenings, and those who have read its *Proceedings* testify to the care with which they have been drawn up. With such serious scientific research the Church can have no quarrel. A book defending the reality of the phenomena produced by Rudi Schneider was written by a Jesuit who had taken part in the séances. There is all the difference in the world between objective scientific study and the interested seeking of phenomena by a bereaved person in distress. Harry Price devoted his life to such investigations under laboratory conditions, and wrote a number of popular books on the subjects. Spiritualists did not like him because he was expert in detecting fraud. But though he exposed many mediums in the course of his life, he was convinced that there was much which could not be put down to fraud: "Ninety-nine per cent of the 'phenomena' which we hear about are due to fraud (conscious or subconscious), self-deception, natural causes, malobservation, or sheer lying." But there still

remained, he thought, an obstinate one per cent which were at present inexplicable.

Of Henry Sidgwick, who founded the Society for Psychical Research, William James wrote:

Like all founders, Sidgwick hoped for a certain promptitude of results; and I heard him say, the year before his death, that if anyone had told him at the outset that after twenty years he would be in the same identical state of doubt and balance that he started with, he would have deemed the prophecy incredible. It would appear impossible that that amount of handling evidence should bring so little finality of decision. My own experience has been similar to Sidgwick's. For twenty-five years I have been in touch with the literature of psychical research, and have been acquainted with numerous "researchers". I have also spent a good many hours (though far fewer than I ought to have spent) in witnessing (or trying to witness) phenomena. Yet I am theoretically no "further" than I was at the beginning.

And mediums themselves (like Eileen Garrett during much of her life) have felt unable to accept the Spiritualist explanation of supernormal phenomena.

The accuracy of Harry Price's accounts of what happened at Borley Rectory is open to serious doubt, but it can be granted that on occasion strange things seem to happen. But it does not follow that because strange things happen, the Spiritualist explanation and view of the universe is the correct one. People are cured at Lourdes, by Pastor Jeffreys, and by Christian Scientists, in a way that confounds the doctors, but these cures do not prove the truth of Roman Catholicism, Protestant revivalism, or Christian Science. Healing is often given by the sacrament of Holy Unction as well as by Spiritualists, but in themselves these wonders prove nothing. The intervention of the dead has not been shown to be the most likely explanation.

Poltergeists, or spirits which manifest their presence by noisy behaviour and throwing articles around, are another headache for those who like to believe that everything has its explanation. The Wesley household at Epworth accepted "Old Jeffrey" as almost one of the family. Poltergeist phenomena have been reported from all parts of the world and show a striking similarity one to another, and their entire pointlessness strongly suggests

that they are genuine. But wherever they occur, there is generally an adolescent concerned in the events in one way or another, and perhaps a naturalistic solution is to be sought for.

Telepathy is a convenient word which describes, rather than explains, the process by which thoughts are transferred from one mind to another apart from the ordinary channels of sense. This is not uncommon, and there must be few people who could not give examples of it from their own experience. Sometimes the communication takes the form not of a thought presented to the mind, but of a voice heard or an apparition seen. Telepathic communications involving death or disaster seem to be particularly common. But though the laws of its occurrence are not known, it is not hard to envisage the possibility of it. It is very different with similar experiences which are prophetic and take place before the incident occurs. Recent experiments under laboratory conditions by Professor Rhine, Dr Soal, and Dr Hettinger are even more difficult to evaluate. But what is clear is that very odd and surprising results are produced for which there must be some natural explanation; and this leads one to believe that many at least of the wonders of Spiritualism are produced by natural means, and do not depend on the Spiritualist explanation of them. Information which purports to be given by spirits may in fact be the result of some sort of telepathic communication between the living. Nevertheless, it is also true that if telepathy is possible between two living people, there is no reason in principle why telepathy should not be equally possible between a spirit and a living person.

If precognition is a possibility, we may admit postcognition. The most remarkable example of this is the experiences of the two ladies at Versailles, described by them in *An Adventure*. Now that their identity is known, it can be seen that they were persons of undoubted integrity, and their testimony can be unreservedly accepted. But it is not probable that the consciousnesses of these ladies really travelled into the past, just as in cases of precognition there is no journey into the future. Dr Osty, who has investigated many case of the latter, is sure that the pictures of the future so acquired are constructions on the part of the sensitive rather than identical with external reality.

It is a very shallow materialism which dismisses the paranormal and miraculous as hallucination or coincidence, and it is an equally shallow religiosity which believes not only all the phenomena which Spiritualists produce, but also the explanations which Spiritualists give of them. Even if the phenomena are genuine, the explanations may be mistaken. As a religion, Spiritualism is hostile to the Catholic Faith and is a rival to it; such Christian trimmings as there may sometimes be at séances may easily mislead the unwary. And far from being "the religion of the future", it is a religion of the *past*, and scarcely deserving of the name religion. For it is thoroughly man-centred. There is little genuine interest in or worship of God: the spirits rather than God are the centre of attention. Many Spiritualists, especially abroad, are atheists, and a séance without a religious atmosphere is just as productive of "results" as one which has a Christian setting. As a religion it is of a very low order, since it seeks to *use* God and the supernatural for human ends rather than to be used by God for his ends. The Christian is taught that in this life he must be content to walk by faith rather than by sight, and his fellowship with God is of a spiritual character and not dependent on automatic writing, table-turning, or ectoplasm. Having the true revelation of God in Jesus Christ, he has no use for spiritualistic revelations, the utter banality of which made Joad observe: "Even if ghosts have souls, they certainly have no brains."

The attitude of the New Testament, as well as the Old, is uncompromisingly hostile to anything resembling Spiritualism. When Jesus was confronted by people who were possessed and clairvoyantly recognized him for what he was, his answer was to cure them. He integrated their partially dissociated selves and restored them to normality. He did not encourage them to cultivate their psychic gifts, much less to publicize them so that they might convey revelations from the dead to others. When St Paul met a medium at Philippi, whose psychic gifts were exploited for the profit of others, he effected her cure, thereby putting an end to her clairvoyance (Acts 16. 16-19). It is not surprising therefore that the Church of Jesus Christ has consistently condemned Spiritualism and all kindred superstitions as gravely disloyal to revealed truth. No Spiritualistic "revelation" can *add* anything to the truth which the Christian already believes, but only too

often it *takes away* part of the Catholic Faith and leads the inquisitive into serious error. Of all the Spiritualists who claim the name of Christian only a very small minority would claim to be orthodox Christians, and most of them are not Christians at all, in the sense in which the Church understands the word. Spiritualists are fond of attacking the intolerance of the Church in condemning their beliefs, but inasmuch as they contradict the fundamental tenets of the Catholic Faith, the Church's attitude could hardly be different :

When they tell you to consult mediums and ghosts that cheep and gibber in low murmur, ask them if a nation should not rather consult its God. Say, "Why consult the dead on behalf of the living? Consult the Message and the Counsel of God!" (Isa. 8. 19, 20, tr. Moffatt.)

Where the Catholic Faith is strongly held, with its teaching about the souls in purgatory and the saints in heaven, there is found little to attract in Spiritualism. Superstition seeps in readily, however, where there is no true religion and where the materialist outlook on life is felt or found to be unsatisfying. It is significant that Spiritualism and astrology flourish in the post-Christian and secularized world of to-day.

Christianity has no quarrel with psychical research conducted under suitable conditions. If it could be shown, for example, that a medium could by telekinesis cause an object to move its position, our estimate of what was possible to man would have to be enlarged, and further research would be called for to determine the conditions under which such telekinesis was possible and the factors which made it possible. It would be a step forward if it were possible to formulate a law about spirit-appearances, and scientific study of paranormal phenomena is much to be encouraged. But psychical research as a branch of investigation is very different from the Spiritualism which purports to be a religion, and some of those who are most deeply interested in scientific psychical research are strongly opposed to Spiritualism.

The dangers to the individual of attendance at Spiritualistic séances can be illustrated by the following story, related by Father W. H. G. Holmes, O.M.C., in his *Memories of the Supernatural*. A lady who had read an All Souls' Day sermon of his came to

him and urged him to warn people against Spiritualism. She had lost her only son in the First World War, and had been passionately anxious to know whether he still survived. She had spent a great deal of time and money at séances in London and elsewhere, but had entirely failed to get any message from her son or to establish communication with him. But the mediums whom she consulted assured her that she herself had considerable psychic gifts, and for a time she was willing to be sent into trances and to give communications to others. However, one day in prayer she became vividly conscious of her son's presence and even of his voice. He bade her give up her association with Spiritualists, because nothing but evil came in this way from the unseen world. He told her that she could and did have communion with him in Christ, and that when she prayed, he was conscious of her fellowship with him. The greatness of her joy can be easily imagined, and she at once renounced any dealings with mediums. But there followed six months of agony, during which time she was tormented by evil spirits using the most revolting and blasphemous language and even, it would seem, resorting to physical violence. Finally the assaults ceased, and the peace of God once more ruled in her heart. Other people too have testified that once one has started allowing one's psychic gifts to be exploited, it is not so easy to stop.

